THE CHRISTIAN PRIESTHOOD.

A Sermon

DELIVERED ON TUESDAY MORNING, MAY 13, 1851,

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AT ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH, LOTHBURY.

"Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." —REVELATION i. 5-6.

COLD must be the heart, and ignorant of the mercies obtained for us by Christ, which is not ready to join in this ascription of praise to the Redeemer—he who "so loved us as to give himself for us," "who died the just for the unjust, that he might bring us unto God," and secure through all eternity the admiring songs of those who are themselves forgiven through his blood, and accepted through his merits. But we are not to wait till heaven be actually gained before we ascribe to him glory and dominion—"Unto you who believe he is precious." Our songs indeed will be weak and imperfect whilst we yet linger on earth; but he who feels that Christ hath "delivered him from going down into the pit," "that he has gone to prepare a place for him in his father's house,"—it may be but with a stammering tongue and a feeble hand, but it will be *from* the heart, and *with* the heart, with fervency as well as with frequency, that he will raise the anthem—"Worthy, worthy, worthy, is the Lamb."

But all this is sufficiently obvious, and our text would not need much comment if it demanded praise for the Redeemer merely as having "loved us, and washed us from our sins in his blood." But the Evangelist adds remarkable words, and these words are to furnish our subject of discourse. Christ is commemorated not only as having "loved us, and washed us in his blood," but as having "made us kings and priests unto God and his Father," there being here a kind of appropriation to the Christian Church of what had been declared of the Jews—"Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." We are so accustomed to regard the Jewish dispensation as altogether abolished, that there is greater risk of our overlooking what is meant equally for ourselves, than of our appropriating what belongs exclusively to others. We forget that Christians have succeeded to the place occupied by the Jews as "God's peculiar people," and consequently much that was addressed to the "seed of Abraham," under this distinctive character, may have lost none of its force, now that Gentiles are the chosen generation. It is true that the Jews were under an extraordinary government, that for a long time God was their king in such sense as could never be affirmed of any other people. Even when their sinful wish had been complied with, and individuals had been set over them with royal authority, God continued to exercise his superintendence and interference which he never vouchsafed to other nations of the earth. And undoubtedly much that was said to the Jews was said to them with reference to doctrines, but which cannot be transferred without alteration to ourselves, though we have been brought into the relationship which their wickedness forfeited. Christians are now what the Jews once were, a people separated from the

mass of mankind and admitted into special covenant with God; but nevertheless, Christians are not living as the Jews lived, beneath the visible Government of God—receiving their laws from his lips, and expecting present recompense from his hands. There may often, therefore, be difficulty in determining whether words spoken by God to the Jews take only for granted their being a "peculiar people," and so apply not equally to ourselves; or whether they also take for granted the character of their government, and so cannot with propriety be brought down to our own day. In many cases, however, this difficulty does not exist, and in others again it is removed by comparing the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Thus it might have been supposed that it was to their peculiar position—to their living under a theocracy, that the Jews would be a people becoming engaged in holiness of life, and a kingdom of priests. But our text decisively shows that the power has come down to the Christian Church—that we as well as the Jews may combine the regal and sacerdotal characters, being a nation of priests; having been made by Christ "kings and priests unto God, his Father." The words of our text do not seem limited to the men of a particular age, or to a particular church; but are equally descriptive of all true Christians, so that we may take the definition as applicable to every one who in heart and soul is a disciple of Christ. It is true, indeed, that amongst Christians there is an order of men specially set apart to the ministering in holy things, and to whom, by way of distinction, we give the title of priests, but this, only, if possible, with greater solemnity of separation, was also the case with the Jews. The tribe of Levi had no part or inheritance with their brethren, but were unreservedly devoted to the service of the sanctuary; and if, not withstanding this consecration of a whole tribe to the office of the priesthood, the Israelites could be spoken of as "appointed to be a kingdom of priests," certainly it cannot be the fact of there being a ministerial order amongst ourselves which should interfere with the present application of the text. Indeed you may say, and it is true it ought to be observed, that there is no order of the priesthood in the strict and full sense of the term. The ministers of the Church are not priests in the sense in which all ministers of the Jewish Church were. We have not to offer sacrifice, which was the chief part of the priestly office, but which altogether ceased when our great High Priest, whom every other typified, "put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." We have to preach the Gospel, to administer the holy sacraments, by which Christ hath appointed that a man should be received into his Church, and sustained when admitted. And we consider it certain that no man hath a right to take this honour to himself; and thus, as under the Jewish dispensation, none could be priests who were not born of the family of Aaron, so none now may lawfully "minister in holy things," who has not been solemnly set apart by those to whom Christ hath committed authority. Yet, at the same time, we cannot say that the distinction between the ministers and the congregation is so strongly drawn and defined as it was in the Jewish Church. The ministers are now taken promiscuously from amongst the people, and not from a single family. And when once taken, their office does not include what formerly gave such a special character to the priesthood—that slaying of victims and offering of sacrifice, which invested the sons of Levi with a mysterious and unapproachable dignity. On these accounts, it must, we think, be admitted that if the priestly character could be borne by the whole Jewish people, much more may it be by the whole Christian community; and we therefore now proceed to address you, in the first place, on the fact that Christ by his death hath put us into such a position that we may be, and ought to be, kings and priests unto God; and, in the second place, to speak to you on certain of the consequences which would follow if the priestly character were indeed universal.

Now, it is amongst the most common and certainly not the least dangerous of the errors of the day to identify the Church with the clergy, as though the laity were not to the full as much one of its constituent parts. If you gather the popular opinion from the popular way

of speaking, you would conclude that the church is regarded as a corporation, made up of bishops, priests, and deacons, but including none who do not bear some one of these titles. Our common forms of speech both encourage and prove the mistake; for we speak of a man as "designed for the church" when preparing for the clerical profession, and you speak of him as "entering the church" when he takes holy orders. And if it were a mere *verbal* inaccuracy, it might be scarcely worth our while to point it out and correct it; but there is a vast deal more than an impropriety of speech; for from talking of the church as though composed wholly of the *clergy*, men come practically to forget that it is composed equally of the *laity;* and, when once this is forgotten, their own duties will be forgotten; and we shall hear of laymen coming forward in support of the church, just as though they were the generous and chivalrous defenders of that which had no claims on their succour, in place of being bound, by their own position and their own vows, to uphold that of which they are sworn members. The thing, therefore, of which you should be reminded is this, that I did not enter the church when I took holy orders, and a bishop set me solemnly apart as a minister of the sanctuary. I entered the church when my parents and sponsors brought me to the priest, and he baptised me in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and I have never been made more actually a member of the visible Church than I was then; and though ordination, with its mysterious sacredness, gave me special duties to perform in the church, on which otherwise I could not have entered, yet it did not, and could not, engraft me more thoroughly into the church, nor give me a stricter fellowship than I already possessed. It follows, therefore, that every one of you, if he have duly received Christian baptism, is as equally a member of the church as myself, who have been appointed to minister in holy things. I am indeed a *minister* of the church, but not on that account more a *member* of the church than any of those amongst whom I officiate.

And so soon as you possess yourselves of this, the correct and simple idea of the church, you must perceive the propriety of designating a Christian community as made up of priests. We are not speaking of what that community may be by *practice*, but only of what it is by *profession;* of what it *ought* to be, and of what it *would* be, if it acted faithfully up to the obligations it had taken on itself. When settled in Canaan, the Jews were far from proving themselves a "kingdom of priests," for they turned aside after false gods, and dishonoured, in place of magnifying, the name of Jehovah. But supposing them to have been a nation of righteous men, not only *outwardly* in covenant with God, but consecrated *in heart* to his service; then it is easy to perceive that they would have stood, to all surrounding countries, in the very position in which the tribe of Levi stood to themselves; they would have been witnesses for the Almighty to the rest of the world, standing in the midst of the vast temple of the earth, and instructing the ignorant in the mysteries of truth, and beyond question, what the Jewish nation might have been, that may be the Christian Church; yea, that would it be if its every member acted up to the vows which were made for him at his baptism. Let a parish of *nominal* Christians be converted into a parish of *real* Christians, so that there should not be one within its circuit who did not adorn the doctrine of the Gospel; and what should we have but a parish of priests to the high and living God? We call it *a parish of priests*, because we can feel that it would be as a kind of little sanctuary in the midst of a country or city, which might elsewhere be deformed by much ignorance and profligacy. Just as, in the midst of this parish itself, would rise its church, more sacred than any other structure, so would the parish stand in the midst of surrounding parishes, a holier spot, and fuller of the presence of our God. And as fresh lessons in the truths of religion would be continually delivered to the dwellers in this parish, from their own pulpit and by their own priests, so would those dwellers themselves be examples and instructors to all by whom they were encompassed, and thus practically discharge

a noble part of the ministerial office. There would be no trenching upon functions which belong exclusively to men who have been ordained to the service of the temple; but nevertheless there would be that fine and thorough exhibition of Christianity, which s amongst the most powerful of preaching, and that noble presentation of every energy to God, which is far beyond the costliest of sacrifice and burnt-offering.

And you will easily see that, in passing from *a parish* to *a nation*, we introduce no change into our argument; we only enlarge its application; for a kingdom is to other kingdoms what a parish is to other parishes. We cannot tell you what a spectacle it would be in the midst of the earth, if any one people, as a body, acted on the principles, and fulfilled the vows, of Christianity; but we are sure that no fitter title could be given to such a people than that of a nation of priests. You know that, however the influences of Christianity may have been counteracted by the corruptions of the nature with which it has to deal, they are admirably calculated to promote present happiness, so that, if allowed full scope, they would banish all discord, and rapidly cover a land with peaceful and contented families. It seems to us impossible, that a thoroughly Christian nation should do otherwise than advance with extraordinary speed to the very summit of prosperity: for having in itself none of those causes of weakness and dissension which must exist wherever vice pervades great masses of a population, it would concentrate unbroken energies on its every undertaking; and seeking always the guidance of God, and adventuring on nothing in its own strength, would never be engaged in what might issue disastrously. And the prosperity of such a kingdom would quickly draw upon it the notice of the whole world; and then would its Christianity, the producing cause of its prosperity, become the object of universal attention. The men of other lands would observe, with amazement and admiration, what a charter of purest liberty had been framed from the Bible; what a high road to all that is stable in civil institutions, splendid in national greatness, and beautiful in domestic relations, had been found by those who walked only by the light of God's word. It must, therefore, come to pass, that the nation in question would be as a temple to all surrounding tribes, and that the result would be the same as though from the east and west, from the north and south, men flocked to its portals, that they might receive instruction from a consecrated priesthood.

Neither is it only through the example they would set, and the exhibition they would furnish of the beneficial power of Christianity, that the inhabitants of this country would be as the priests of the Most High. You cannot doubt that such a nation would be, in the largest sense, a missionary nation, that its ruling desire would be to procure admission to the Gospel in all districts of the earth. Conscious of the inestimable blessing which Christianity had proved to its own families, and moved by a sense of freely giving what it had freely received, this people would not send forth a single ship on any enterprise of commerce, without making it also a vehicle for the transmission of the principles of religion; and as the stately thing walked the waters, to freight itself with the produce of far-off climes, it would carry the sowers of that seed of life which is to restore the verdure to a fallen creation.

Oh, we again say, of the land in whose every habitation the religion of Jesus had thorough dominion, that it would be as a great temple in the midst of the earth, in whose recesses God visibly dwelt, and from whose altars ascended flames which fixed the gaze of men of other tribes. If you could occupy that land with the walls of one mighty sanctuary, and crown them with a dome whose span should be that of the overarching sky, and bring within them the mysterious shekinah that hallowed the structure which Solomon reared; there would not be so sublime an edifice, and so manifest an indwelling of Deity, as when the temple is builded of all the hearts in the land, and the Most High shrines himself in the secresies of every spirit. And what shall we say of the dwellers in such a land, of those who inhabit the temple which, as

it were, they constitute? Serving God with all the assiduousness of a cheerful and unwearied devotion, and acting in their every proceeding on the principles of religion, they are as "stewards of the mysteries of the kingdom," and dispense the law, and publish the proclamation. Earnest in imparting the privileges they enjoy, and desiring to show their gratitude by enlarging, if possible, the kingdom of the Redeemer, they are as ministers of the faith who spread far and wide the offer of salvation. And thus are they filling to surrounding nations the very office which is filled to themselves by those whose special business it is to teach in their churches; they are keeping up a sacred fire on the altar, that those "sitting in darkness" may "see a great light;" they are blowing the silver trumpet of the jubilee, that those ready to perish may hear it and live; they are offering themselves a living sacrifice to the Almighty, that pagans may learn to cast their idols to the moles and to the bats. And what, then, is to be said of them, as their practical Christianity thus turns their country into one magnificent sanctuary, from whose pulpit the Gospel-summons goes forth to all the ends of the earth, and whose walls so echo the praises of the Saviour, that distant islands are roused by the symphony—what is to be said, but that in them is fulfilled all which our text ascribes to the interference of Christ? and they may justly speak of the Redeemer not only as having loved them, and washed them from their sins in his blood, but as having "made them priests and kings unto God, his Father."

Now, enough on the fact that the Christian Church ought to be a community of priests. You will have sufficiently gathered from what has been advanced that Christian nations stand in the same position to heathen nations as Christian ministers to Christian congregations. They have much the same duties to perform—the same power of witnessing for God, the same opportunities of supporting the great cause of truth. In the one case as well as in the other there may be a great want of fidelity. The priesthood in the persons of the nation, just as the priesthood in the persons of individuals may be grievously disgraced, and its obligations forgotten, and its duties not discharged; but all this interferes not with the fact that there has been an ordination—a solemn setting apart to the service of God, whether of a people or an individual.

And what we most earnestly wish to impress on your minds—and we would rather run the risk of wearying you with repetition, than allow any one to miss so important a truth—is, that every man who has been received by baptism into the Christian Church, has been invested with a priestly office, and shall be hereafter dealt with according to the manner in which that office has been performed. If the church, as a body, is to be a kingdom of priests, it follows, that every member of that church, in his individual capacity, can be nothing less than a priest. And when you demand of me the sense in which this can be true, we do not tell you, that every Christian man is to be a priest to other Christian men; for in each Christian Church there is a consecrated priesthood, whose special office it is to minister to their fellow-Christians; but we do tell you, that what the clergyman is to you, that should you be to the world. If he be set amongst you as a witness for God and an instructor in truth, you also are set in the midst of the world witnesses for God and instructors in truth. If it be his business in regard of his congregation to reclaim the wandering, alarm the careless, and instruct the ignorant, this is the precise definition of your business in regard of the world. I have, indeed, received a two-fold ordination, and you only a single one; mine that of baptism and the laying on of hands, and yours that of baptism alone; and, we confess, that there are obligations imposed by the double ordination, which are not by the single. But the single ordination, the ordination of baptism, bound you all to the being as "a city set upon a hill," and thus appointed you, as it were, to a *pulpit*; and to the "letting your light shine before men," "that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven," and thus appointed you to an *altar*, on which celestial fire should ever burn brightly. You cannot, then, avoid the conclusion,

that, as members of a Christian Church, you are members of what St. Peter terms "a royal priesthood." The priestly office, indeed, is no longer what it was as regards the *ministers* of the church; but it is not one jot altered as regards the *members* of the church. It is not what it was as regards the *ministers*, because they have not to make atonement by the offering up of sacrifice; but it is what it was as regards the *members*, because their ministrations are still to be those of a holy life, and consistency and steadfastness in the maintenance of truth. And what we now wish to ply you with, are practical considerations—showing you what your conduct would be if you kept steadily in mind this, your own priestly character. In order to this, let us observe to you, that the members of the church watch its ministers with singular jealousy, and that faults, which would be comparatively overlooked, if committed by a merchant or a lawyer, are held up to utter execration, when they can be fastened on a clergyman. We are not in the least disposed to quarrel with this mode of procedure, or to ask for gentler dealing with the offences of the priesthood. We are quite agreed with the most keen-eyed observers of the clerical order, and with the most indignant reprovers of their every inconsistency, that pride, or immorality, or want of charity, is more hateful in a clergyman than in any one else; that his profession gives a heinousness to his sin; and that whenever he turns aside from the paths of rectitude and virtue, he may justly be visited with an odium and a scorn, such as were not to be incurred had he been engaged in a less sacred calling. The vows of his baptism were full and energetic, for he bound himself to the renouncing "the world, the flesh, and the devil;" but when his faculties were matured, in the ripeness of his manhood, he voluntarily vowed the yet stronger vows of ordination, bound himself, with all solemnity, as in the presence of God, to form and fashion himself according to the doctrine of Christ, and make himself a wholesome pattern and example to Christ's flock: and if he be unmindful of these accumulated vows; if a sordid selfishness, or the fires of base passions, or the lust of advancement, deform and desecrate one who has thus separated himself from the world and worldly things; we will not ask you to deal with him by any light measure; we will rather be among the first to own, that there cannot come down upon him a heavier than the just weight of public reprobation; and that if there move one upon the earth who deserves more than another to be a mark for the finger of scorn, it is the perjured thing, who, having sworn to be faithful in the priesthood, joins the worshippers of Mammon, or the slaves of sensuality. You cannot, then, accuse us of any wish to obtain a less rigorous treatment of the clerical order than men in general show themselves ready to give. We think the treatment altogether deserved, for the ministers of the church have undoubtedly pledged themselves to the rest of that church, that they will in all things show themselves abundant in good works; and whensoever the pledge is wilfully forfeited, there can be nothing more just than the indignation with which the forfeiture is followed.

But now let us suppose, men and brethren, that a case of clerical delinquency is engaging the attention of a company of members of the church, and that they are passing an unqualified condemnation on the offender who has flagrantly disgraced his sacred profession. It will not matter what has been the particular character of his offence; but we should like to be placed in the midst of that company, whilst one tongue after another delivered the indignant and sarcastic rebuke. We should not wish to be there in order to arrest or mitigate the vehement condemnation; though we might feel that there was a sort of glorying over the offender—an absence of all that savoured of charitableness, which showed that the reprovers were in much need of reproof; but we should wish to be there, that when men's feelings were strongly excited, and strongly expressed—the great aggravation of the offence on which they were commenting being that the offender was a priest;—we should wish to be there that we might press them home with the question, Are not *ye* priests? It would be a fine opportunity, just

when the bearing the priestly office was adduced as incontrovertible evidence that pride, or dishonesty, or immorality, should draw down on an individual unmingled detestation —it would be a fine opportunity for turning round upon many of the company, who might not themselves be clear in these matters, and saying with Nathan, "*Ye* are the men." Their answer might be, "We belong to the laity, we belong not to the clergy; and therefore, whatever our sins, they want that special aggravation which, on your own admission, attaches to the crime which we now reprobate and condemn." But our reply would be, "You may be forgetful of your high calling, you may be *ignorant* of your high calling; but nevertheless, inasmuch as you belong to a Christian Church, ye have been made priests of the Most High God. And if there be avarice amongst you, it is the avarice of a priest; if there be pride amongst you, it is the pride of a priest; if there be sensuality amongst you, it is the sensuality of a priest. We are of one mind with you, the being a priest imposes on the individual an additional and mighty obligation to the "living soberly, and righteously, and godly in the world," and that if, in spite of this obligation, he be the slave of lust, or the votary of ambition, he gives a blow to the cause of religion such as he cannot repair, and for which he deserves the vast burden of universal contempt. But you are only describing your own condition if you be yourselves guilty of not walking blameless in the commandments of the Lord. You belong to a nation of priests. Ye are priests to the world; and precisely that mischief which is wrought to the Church when one of its ordained ministers forgets his calling and defiles himself with unrighteousness—that very mischief we say is wrought to the church, when one of its baptised priests lives the life of a heathen, as though he had no knowledge of immortality and no dread of judgment.

It is thus that we would labour to take advantage of that very merited scorn of which clerical inconsistency, or clerical profligacy, is sure to be the object. The men who manifest this scorn may be little aware, but it is our duty and our desire to make them aware, that they are passing sentence on themselves, and that all that strong and unmeasured rebuke which they pour on an offending priest is virtually falling on their own heads, unless the power of Christianity be visible in the whole of their deportment. We wish to impress on you more and more deeply that you feel nothing but what you ought to feel when indignant at hearing of the wickedness of a clergyman. Again and again would we tell you, that you are perfectly right in considering that the circumstance of the man being a priest, lays on him additional obligation to the shunning every vice, and the practising every virtue; and that where the obligation is disregarded, the blame can hardly be greater than is deserved; but we would have you also bear in mind that you are yourselves invested with the office of the priesthood; that you cannot sin merely as lawyers, or merchants, or tradesmen; you must sin as *priests*, and therefore incur that heavier condemnation which you are all ready enough to award to a man of my profession.

If there be any truth whatever in our text, this must be true. And we think that it might tend greatly to the strengthening you in godliness, and the arming you against temptation, if you would carry this truth with you into your families, and into the scenes of your business, and if you could be brought to ask yourselves, when urged to the commission of a sin—What should we say if we heard of a priest committing this sin? And ought we to say less of ourselves, seeing that we also belong to a royal priesthood? The anger which breaks promptly forth on any report of clerical iniquity,—let this be equally ready to blaze out in your own case, and that because the layman is as much a clergyman to the world as the clergyman is to the church; and you will be more than ever "a peculiar people," and more than ever on the watch against all that is forbidden by the Gospel of Christ. There could not be the dishonourable trick, the fraudulent dealing, the pride, the licentiousness, which it is impossible to overlook in a professedly Christian community, if the members of that community regarded their

households, and their counting-houses, and their shops, as so many churches in which they had sacred functions to perform, and kept always in mind that a heathen indeed may offend merely as a man, but the Christian must offend as a priest. Ye are priests, baptism having set you amongst priests that you might offer spiritual sacrifice acceptable unto God, through Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. But are there none amongst you who have thrown to the winds the vows of ordination—you who deny that ordination, and who even think it an excuse for less strictness in religion, that ye are only laymen, and therefore not bound to so much circumspection as the clergy. Others we trust there are who feel that they have undertaken the priestly office, and whose endeavour it is to honour God by its faithful discharge.

Persevere, beloved brethren, in your holy ministrations. Still continue to offer up yourselves as "living sacrifices," to preach to the world with the beautiful eloquence of a righteous life, and to walk towards heaven with the fragrant incense of prayers and pure thoughts. We shall soon enter "within the veil," and there in the presence of the great minister of the sanctuary discharge a loftier priesthood, and walk a nobler temple. We shall be "kings and priests" for ever—kings, seeing that they who suffer with Christ here, are to reign with him hereafter; priests, inasmuch as we shall rest not, day nor night, presenting oblations to our heavenly Father. Then shall you join, as on earth you scarcely can, in the anthem of our text, tracing everything to Christ, all your glory, and all your happiness. This shall be your lofty, your enraptured chaunt—"Unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and made us kings and priests unto God, his Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever."